

Themes of Cathedral History

Fr. Steven Avella

As I sheltered in place for the past months, I spent most of my time with your history. The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist has a magnificent and complicated past.

Looking back at the chronology of events that first established this community of faith and built this magnificent building, I came across a familiar story. Archbishop John Martin Henni, who peacefully awaits the Resurrection in the vaults below, was the father of the Cathedral, He personally helped secure the land, the capital, hired the architect, and guided the details of its décor.

Other pastors, laypeople, and religious built on what Henni accomplished. Many of these names are “hidden figures” who raised the money, cooked the dinners, and supported the church in many ways.

Msgr. James Keogh whose thirty year term (1880-1910) virtually remade the Cathedral property and who championed the schools;

John Black, a former Milwaukee mayor and congressman who gave the seed money for church’s iconic tower.

The Sisters of Charity, the Holy Cross Brothers, and the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa who educated generations of Catholic children all around the city.

Msgr. Francis E. Murphy who dealt with the disastrous fire of 1935 and helped the Cathedral rise again.

There are so many more. I hope to share them with you through these bulletin articles—and hopefully a book on the Cathedral’s history.

Its continual challenges were demographic. People moved or were driven away from the Cathedral neighborhood and found membership in other parishes. Money was a continual problem—not only for salaries, but the needs of the schools and the continual repairs required to keep the building intact and safe. The parish relied on the old system of “pew rent” until the late 1940s. Unending fairs, card games, raffles, festivals were an economic life line.

It was also a welcoming place to city’s Irish and US born Catholics. Until recently, its pastors always had Hibernian surnames and St. Patrick’s Day was often celebrated with liturgical splendor and feasting.

“I have loved O Lord, the beauty of your house and the place where you glory dwells.”.